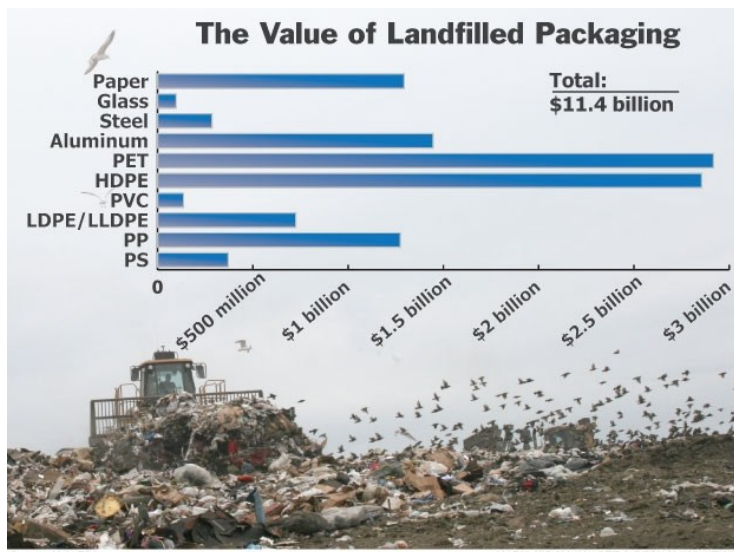


Update: Study Shows Landfilled Resources Worth Billions

Shawn Wright | August 7, 2012



There's a saying in the waste industry that trash smells like money.

Recyclables have that same odor, too.

But much of that treasure is being buried.

In 2010, \$11.4 billion worth of recyclable packaging ended up in U.S. landfills, according to a recent study.

"Unfinished Business: The Case for Extended Producer Responsibility for Post-Consumer Packaging" was published by [As You Sow](#), a nonprofit organization that promotes environmental and social corporate responsibility through shareholder advocacy, coalition building and legal strategies.

"I really want this to be a resource to add to this debate ... on whether and how big consumer packaged goods companies should be taking responsibility for their packaging," said Conrad MacKerron, senior director of [As You Sow](#) and the report's author.

The \$11.4 billion estimate was calculated using the U.S. EPA's 2010 municipal solid waste data.

The report found that the highest value of discarded packaging was PET, with \$2.9 billion worth of it landfilled in 2010. (The EPA calculated that 2.6 million tons of PET was discarded in landfills in 2010, which indicates that 23% of the PET generated that year was recycled.)

"PET beat aluminum, in terms of the value of packaging," MacKerron said. "It kind of makes sense because I think we're getting about 50% of the aluminum cans, but we're only getting 25% or 30% of the PET bottles."

Less than one-third of PET bottles are recycled in the U.S. compared to Japan's 72%, according to the report. The U.S. plastic packaging recycling rate is 12.1%.

HDPE – items such as milk jugs and laundry detergent – was the second most valuable discarded recyclable packaging, worth \$2.8 billion. Discarded aluminum packaging was valued at \$1.4 billion, according to the report. Paper, including corrugated cardboard, was valued at \$1.3 billion. The overall U.S. packaging recycling rate of 48.3% is far below its European counterparts, according to the report. Denmark has an 84% packaging recycling rate, Belgium is at 78%, the Netherlands at 72% and Germany at 73%.

"There's research that up to one-third of the food packaging is consumed away from home, and we don't have a great public system," MacKerron said. "If you're out eating your lunch or you're on the go and you're discarding beverage containers and sandwich packaging, you need to put these recycling bins in public parks, convenience stores or gas stations."

As the report's title suggests, having companies take responsibility for their packaging can play a major role in diverting more recyclable materials – and their value – from landfills. Currently, there are more than 70 extended producer responsibility laws in 32 states that deal with items such as batteries, carpet, cell phones, electronics, paint, and mercury thermostats.

Jim Frey, principal and CEO of Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Resource Recycling Systems, believes there are other avenues to pursue as well. For example, education, rolling curbside-recycling carts, incentive systems, pay-as-you-throw programs and even voluntary producer responsibility initiatives, where the public sector gets involved with disposal bans and mandatory recycling requirements, can all play bigger roles than just EPR.

"I think it would be simplistic to say that we should all just jump into EPR systems and everything will be good," Frey said. "Even some of the EPR systems out there perform poorly, so the real focus should be on best practices and efficiency."

In addition to having companies take responsibility for the recyclable material, the report suggests that the U.S. should improve its waste collection infrastructure to capture a greater amount of post-consumer materials and develop closed-loop systems.

"I think that's one of the strong messages here is issues with our infrastructure, ... not really having enough curbside recycling for 25% of the population," MacKerron said. "We're still not getting those collected. There's quite a potential here that I think has been ignored for a while of materials."

The report's \$11.4 billion estimate on the value of landfilled packaging is likely way too low, because it's based on flawed data, said Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Edward Humes, author of "Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash."

"Unfortunately, the reliance on the statistical analysis of our municipal waste stream, that even the EPA admits is inaccurate, is a shame because they've reduced the impact that this kind of analysis could have," Humes said. "The best data I think that's available suggests we're landfilling almost twice as much as the EPA is indicating, by weight."

According to Humes' book, the EPA "scandalously underestimates America's trash by relying on byzantine simulations and equations rather than actual counts of trash going into landfills." In fact, writes Humes, more than 140 million tons of garbage is unaccounted for in the process.

"Whenever those EPA statistics are used – the materials-flow analysis they're relying on – it's going to incorrectly lower the total amount of waste and show a proportionately higher rate of diversion than the real world enjoys," Humes said. "It's giving us a rosier view. ... And what that will do to the value calculation that this report generates is drive it down lower than it should be."